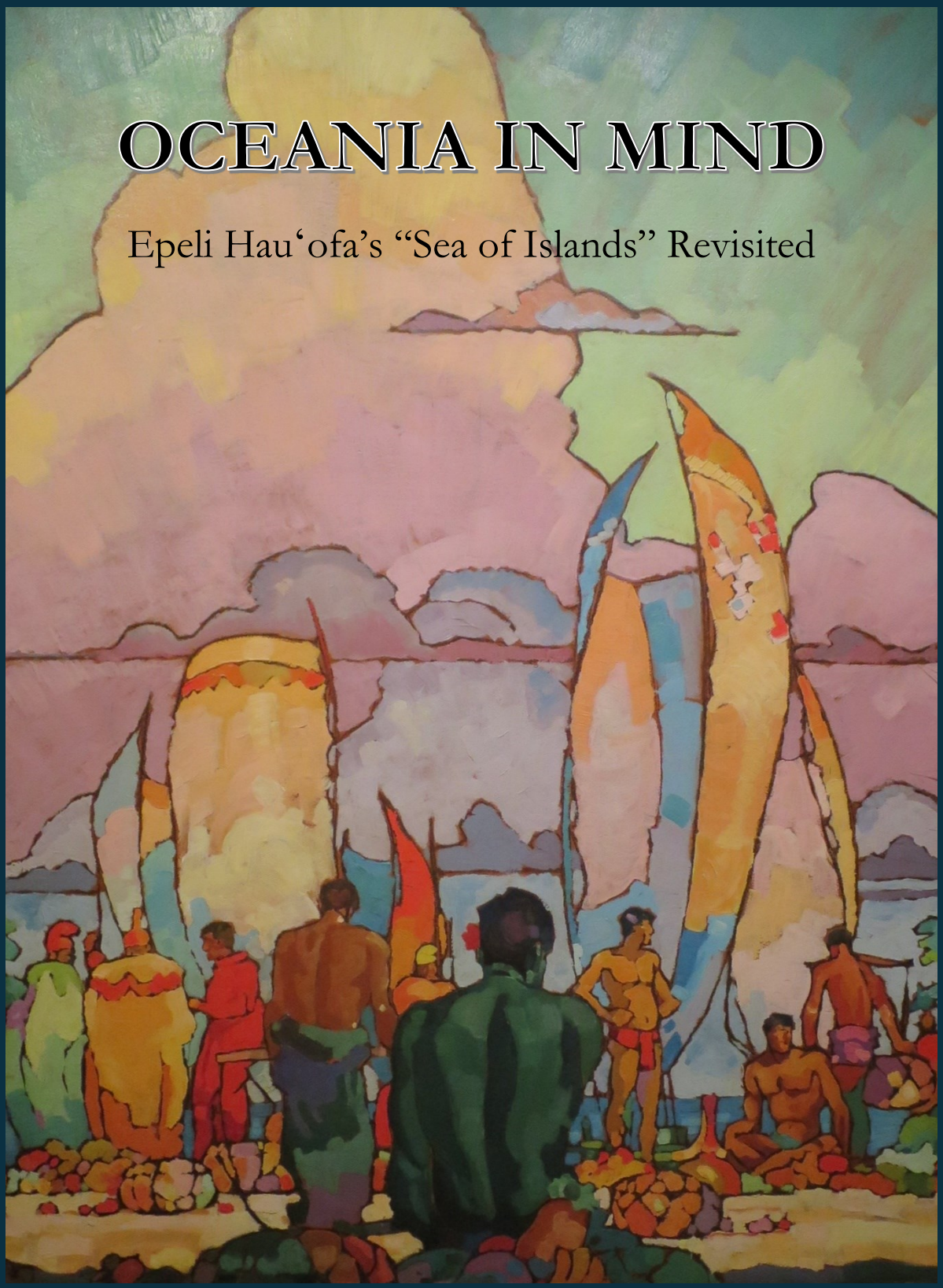
Thomas Malm

OCEANIA IN MIND

Epeli Hau‘ofa’s “Sea of Islands” Revisited



Lund Studies in Human Ecology · 18

ABSTRACT: In his essay "Our Sea of Islands" (1993), Epeli Hau'ofa advocated a pan-territorial view of unity in a culturally and politically fragmented region. Focusing on Oceania as "a sea of islands" rather than as "islands in a far sea" would mean seeing "things in the totality of their relationships". The sea is "the single common heritage" for all its people, he argued. They had travelled freely until the 19th century when imperialism erected boundaries that resulted in the notion that the islands were small, isolated, and poor in resources. By the end of the 20th century, they were once again enlarging their world through emigration. In this book, his argument that it was only a result of modern imperialism that island people became "confined to their tiny spaces" is put into question; there were isolating cultural and geographical factors in Oceania long before that. It is argued that smallness and remoteness do matter for income as well as for the more malign effects of globalization, and that an analysis of "things in the totality of their relationships" must consider global connections far beyond the "Sea of Islands".

Keywords: Epeli Hau'ofa; Sea of Islands; human ecology; islands; MIRAB; Oceania

Epeli Hau'ofa (1939–2009) in his home in Suva, Fiji, 1994, with a copy of Tales of the Tikongs.

(Photo by Thomas Malm.)

Thomas Malm

Oceania in Mind

Epeli Hau‘ofa’s “Sea of Islands” Revisited

The sea flows in and out of Oceania,
and into the other bodies of water
that connect all the land masses of our planet.
The sea unites the entire world.

– Epeli Hau‘ofa.

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(The Pacific Club, Honolulu. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)

Acknowledgement

An early draft of this essay was written for a conference on the Swedish island of Ven in 2010. A somewhat different version was published in Swedish in 2017, but the original manuscript has been gathering dust ever since. The growing interest in the relationship between Polynesians and the sea, particularly due to the voyages of the Hawaiian double-hull canoe *Hōkule'a* and the popularity of the Disney movies about Moana and Maui, eventually made me decide to update my text a bit and make it available online. The result came about after more than 40 years of research and travelling in Oceania, lately financed by the Magnus Bergvall Foundation, the Lars Hierta Memorial Foundation, and the Åke Wiberg Foundation. For this I am of course very grateful. I also thank Godfrey Baldacchino and three anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on a previous draft, the late Grant McCall for many discussions on nissology over the years, Geoff Betram for a note on the origin of the term 'transnational corporations of kin', B.A. Foto in Lund for scanning several of my old slides, Erik Abrahamsson and Christer Lindberg for photos, and my wife Titilia who assisted me with some photography work. The vignettes were drawn by my late friend Sverre Holmsen whose epic *Singing Coral* (1951) continues to inspire my research on Oceania. I am not sure about how Barbara and Epeli Hau'ofa would regard my essay, but I hope they would see it as a contribution to an open-minded discussion about our beloved "Sea of Islands".

Thomas Malm

Contents

In the twilight we sit drinking kava
from the bowl between us.
Who we are we know and need not say
for the soul we share came from Vaihi.[1]
Across the bowl we nod our understanding
of the line that is also our chord
brought by Tangaloa from above …

– Epeli Hau'ofa, "Blood in the Kava Bowl" (1976).

Tangaroa, or Tangaloa in Tongan, was the most widely recognized god in ancient Polynesia, associated with the sea, heavens and creation. In Rarotonga, Cook Islands, where this tiki *was made, he was the god of fertility, the ocean and the fishermen. The myths about him connect islands from the Philippines all the way to Hawai'i, New Zealand and Marquesas. Some of them are more than six thousand years old, having spread with daring seafarers throughout the "Sea of Islands". (Author's collection. Photo: Titilia Raibe Malm.)*

[1] Vaihi (Hawaiki, Hawai'i) is the Tongan name for the legendary ancestral homeland of all Polynesians. In Tongan it is sometimes used proverbially as a symbol of great distance.

Into the Sea of Islands

In the early 1990s, while planning fieldwork in the Kingdom of Tonga, I read *Tales of the Tikongs,* a collection of satiric short stories written by an anthropologist with a Tongan name: Epeli Hau'ofa.[2] Tiko was "a tiny country, so small that mankind is advised not to look for it on a classroom globe for it will only search in vain" (Hau'ofa 1983:69). Apparently, Tonga, one of the microstates of Oceania, had served as a source of inspiration. The author had even been the deputy secretary to the king of Tonga. This made me interested in reading more works by him, and among them his essay "Our Sea of Islands" left a particular strong impression on me. In this landmark publication he argued:

> There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as "islands in a far sea" and as "a sea of islands". The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power. When you focus this way you stress the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships (Hau'ofa 1993a:7).

In a later article, "The Ocean in Us", he stated the following:

> The ocean that surrounds us is the one physical entity that all of us in Oceania share. [...] [T]he sea defines us, what we are and have always been. [...] All of us in Oceania today, whether indigenous or otherwise, can truly assert that the sea is our single common heritage (Hau'ofa 1998:405).

When he presented a preliminary version of the latter essay as a keynote speaker at the 3rd Conference of the European Society for Oceanists in Copenhagen 1996, it was erroneously listed in the program as "The Ocean *is* Us" (my emphasis), something which he found amusing but quite accurate. After another twelve years, an anthology of his writings was, thus, published under the title *We are the Ocean* (2008).

But before that, I had met him in his home in Suva, Fiji, and carried out my fieldwork. He had also visited my home in Sweden, in connection with the conference. By then I had become strongly influenced by him and other scholars who had written about the relationship between people and the sea in Oceania (see Malm 1999), and today

[2] The rotated apostrophe indicates a glottal stop made by a momentary stopping of the breath in the throat.

Moana and Maui in the Disneyland parade. (Photo: Titilia Raibe Malm, Anaheim CA 2024.)

his perspective is a cornerstone for research and debates on culture and political ecology of island people (e.g., D'Arcy 2006, Guiot 2013, Hanlon 2009, Nero 1997, Jolly 2007, Kempf 2009, McCall 1994, Matsuda 2012, Thompson 2020). Even in the Disney movies about Moana and Maui there seem to be some inspiration from Epeli, and the story of maritime exploration in Oceania is indeed an epic one.

For any insight into the conditions for how the people of Oceania perceive the world, and for any discussion on conditions for sustainable development there, it is essential to grasp their relationship to the sea. We do need a better understanding of this as well as inter-island and inter-archipelago relationships (Stratford et al. 2011). But if we wish to see "things in the totality of their relationships," we must also take into consideration global connections far beyond the "Sea of Islands".

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the significance of 'smallness' and 'remoteness' as relative vs. absolute concepts in the past and present of Oceania. A number of analysts have joined Epeli in arguing, in one way or another, that "smallness is a state of mind" as he expressed it (Hau'ofa 1993a:7). Already when "Our Sea of Islands" was first published it was, however, evident from an anthology with contributions from his colleagues at the University of the South Pacific that the subject matter was contentious (Waddell et al. 1993). And the discourse remains positioned, because whereas he depicted Oceania in terms of a world-enlargement by ordinary migrating people, others argue that its migrants are often quite constrained in their

voyaging (Jolly 2001:422–423). Some even see the idea of people sharing a Pan-Oceanic identity as an elitist expression (Crocombe 2001:68, Ratuva 1993:96).

Many Oceanic peoples traditionally perceive the future as laying *not ahead* of them but rather as coming from *behind* so that one cannot see it until it has passed by. "Tradition articulate, selectively remember and connect pasts and presents", James Clifford (2001:475) notes and adds that "the 'past' in indigenous epistemologies is where one looks for the 'future'." When Epeli referred to the maritime past, to myths and to contemporary socio-economic issues, future thus became intertwined with the past and present. But a Fijian human ecologist exemplifies that not all Oceanic intellectuals see the sense in such an approach to realities of the present:

> The reference to myths, legends and oral traditions has no bearing on the existing situation we are faced with. Our people have to think out strategies that will allow us to put to our advantages our existing position. References to big thoughts and deeds should be restricted to the literary writings and folklore of our people (Veitayaki 1993:117).

On the other hand, as stated by a former Vice President of Fiji in an obituary:

> Epeli recognized the vast expanse of sea that envelops us was a pathway rather than a boundary. It shaped our perspectives and defined us as island peoples: a factor we have yet to fully appreciate, acknowledge or understand (Madraiwiwi 2009).

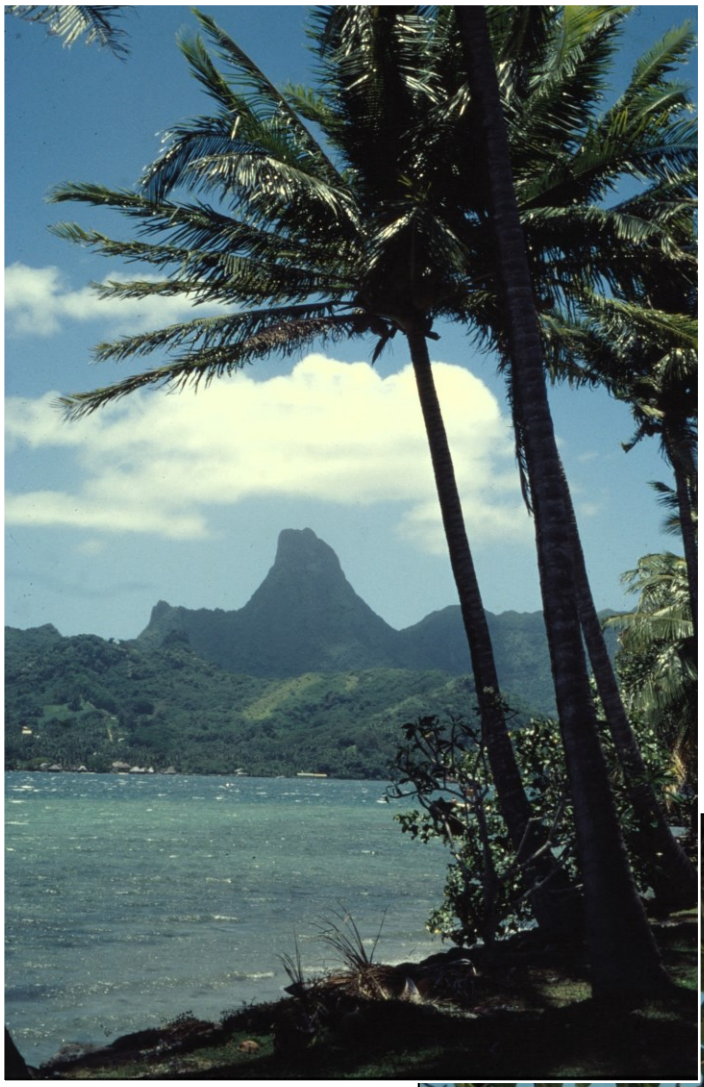
In Tahitian thinking, the past and present are like paddling a canoe when the waves come from behind and reach the shore as breakers in front of you. (Photo: Thomas Malm, Mo'orea, Society Islands 2000.)

Barkcloth and whale teeth from Tonga are still important for ceremonial purposes in Fiji.
(Photo: Thomas Malm, Naviti, Yasawa Islands, Fiji 2005.)

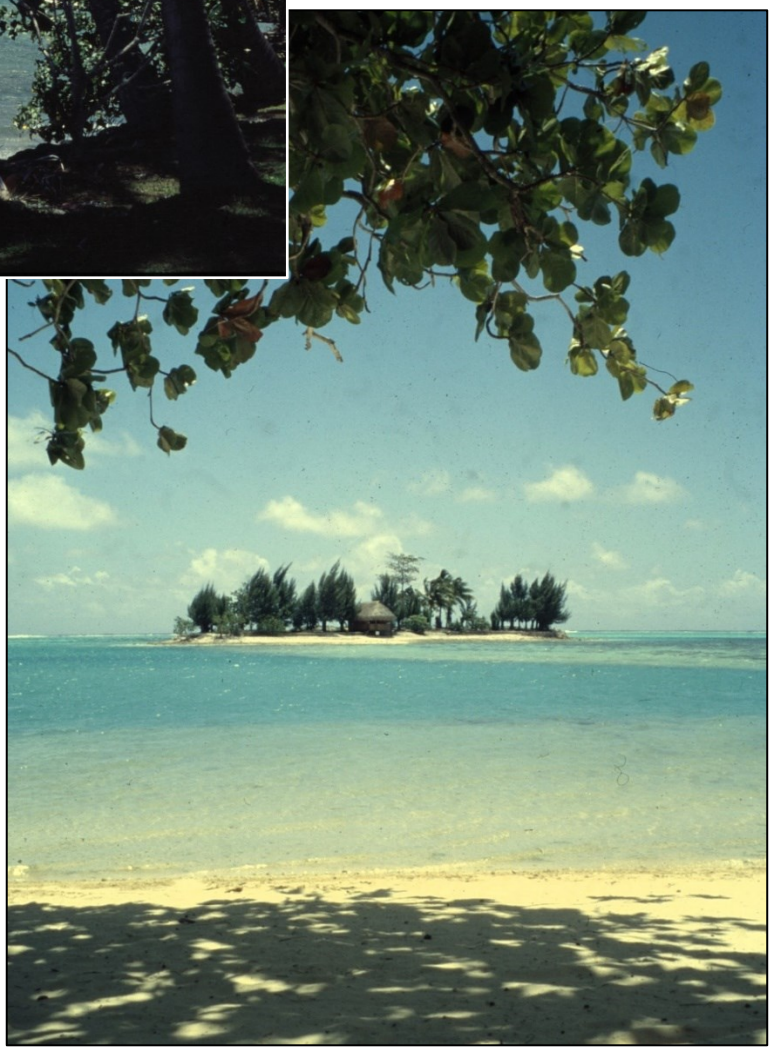
That the Pacific Ocean was a pathway long before European contact is evident from documentation of ancient navigation (Howe 2007, Lewis 1972) and complex long-distance maritime systems of exchange in goods and spouses (Kaeppler 1978, Kirch 2000). Nevertheless, limited resources, the need to control population growth and other issues connected to smallness were known to the people of Oceania long before colonial times and affected thinking. Tongan philosopher 'I. Futa Helu (1999:242), for instance, stated that "Tonga, ever conscious of its smallness and poverty in resources must always turn to her bigger and richer neighbours and exert herself many more times as strongly if she wants to maintain economic and political parity with Samoa and Fiji".

Today, emigration and aid are perceived as safety-valves for problems related to over-population, poverty, and smallness. However, whereas the expression "smallness within bigness" (Schumacher 1973) can be applied to the integration of Oceania into the modern world-system, not all the people would necessarily agree that "small is beautiful".

Exactly what size an island must have to be regarded as "small" or "big" might be arbitrary, but central to my argumentation in this paper is that size and distance matter. If we are to understand political, economic and cultural realities in contempo-



According to the Tahitians, Mo'orea is a "big island," a fenua*, because you can only get a good sense of it by viewing it from the mountains or by traveling around its 60 km long coastline.*



A motu *emerged over its coral reef is, however, a "small island", as it can be taken in at a single glance. (Both photos: Thomas Malm, 2000.)*

Legend states that these large limestone blocks were carried all the way from the island of 'Uvea (Wallis) to Tongatapu by the hero-god Maui. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1988.)

rary Oceania, we cannot ignore the *notion* that most of its islands are small and spread out over vast marine expanses. The alternative view, to quote Clifford (2009:241), is "a utopia of sorts, which many of us share with Hau'ofa. And we do so, of course, with differing degrees of scepticism, ambivalence, pessoptimism […]". As we shall see, there were isolating cultural and geographical factors in Oceania long before Western impact. Neither should we forget that half of the populations everywhere consisted of *women* who in many islands were not even allowed to touch a canoe. Disney's daring Moana has more in common with feminist ideologies of our time than with the women confined to the land and reefs in ancient Oceania (cf. Griffin 1993:63; Malm 1999, 2007a, 2009; Matthews 1991, Tamaira & Fonoti 2018).

Part of the difficulty with debating Epeli's writings is that they are mainly based on his experience and visions, which means that one quickly stirs up emotions of pride rather than being able to focus on facts (and being a Westerner does not make it less controversial). But this does certainly not mean that his works are without theoretical interest or that he should have been unaffected by scholars. His central arguments are, for example, in line with what anthropologist Grant McCall (1994) called 'nissology' and defined as "the study of islands on their own terms". The problem is that these "terms" seldom are "their own", but usually connected to external

powers and global flows of capital and ideas. This means that local or even wider regional perspectives are not enough for understanding the conditions for development in Oceania.

A political-ecological discourse on the "Sea of Islands" should be connected to global systemic anthropology according to which a lot of ethnicity and traditions are constituted by global processes (e.g., see Friedman 1994, 2013). Epeli's depiction of how the islands got restrained in their development by imperialism and colonialism is also reminiscent of dependency theory and development of under-development (see Fratkin 2013) as well as world systems theory on the flows of capital and natural resources connected to centre-periphery relations (see Wallerstein 2004).

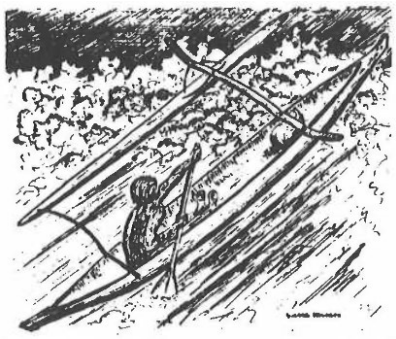
Model of a sailing canoe from Kapingamarangi, a Polynesian outlier in Micronesia. (Author's collection. Photo: Titilia Raibe Malm.)

*Lizards can also have their "Sea of Islands". The crested iguana (*Brachylophus vitiensis*) is endemic to the western part of the Fijian archipelago. Apart from a closely related species in Fiji and Tonga, there are no other iguanas in Oceania. All the others are to be found on the Galapagos Islands, in Tropical America or, curiously enough, on Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. The likely way of dispersal is long distance ocean rafting millions of years ago. (Photo: Thomas Malm, Orchid Island Cultural Centre, Fiji 1984.)*

My discussion on conditions for development, connected to isolation and remoteness in the past and present is intended to put Epeli's vision in a global context. It takes its departure in island biographical theory, a field where one looks at factors that affect biodiversity on ecological islands (i.e., not only 'islands' in the general sense of the term) bordered by other kinds of ecosystems (MacArthur & Wilson 1967; cf. Malm 2026).

Here, this is combined with theoretical and empirical aspects from such different fields as systems ecology, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, history, human geography, climatology, epidemiology, economics, and human ecology. Thematically, it is also connected to the discourses on 'routes' and 'roots'.

So let us imagine that we are gathered around the *kava* bowl. Our minds are open and the sound of the mighty sea fills the air.



An Oceanian and His World

The nowadays common talk among social and cultural analysts on 'roots and routes' (e.g., Clifford 1997, Deloughrey 2007, Friedman 2002) basically concerns the same topics as globalization discourse in general: a world of increasing movement, translocality, and hybridity. Anthropologist Margaret Jolly (2001:422) has noted that Epeli Hau'ofa's vision "tends to celebrate a particular subject position, that of a 'world traveller'. It echoes the particularities of his own life history". When he once said that he was "essentially a peasant, albeit a highly educated one" (Hau'ofa in Subramani 1989:48), his statement was, in a way, about 'roots and routes'.

His 'route' as an academic led to a role that he appears not to have been entirely comfortable with (Hau'ofa 1975, Kolo 1987, Subramani 1989, Thomas 2012a). Although he certainly did carry out fieldwork, he will probably most of all become remembered for his writings as a visionary and satirist (cf. Gillett 2007, Rigby 1994, Waddell et al. 2024, Wesley-Smith 2010). Perhaps this is the way he wanted it to be, because it was storytelling and the literary qualities of scholars like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Bronislaw Malinowski, and later Marshall Sahlins that he found so attractive in anthropology. His satire *Tales of the Tikongs* (1983) has been translated into Danish (2002), and the even more hilarious *Kisses in the Nederends* (1987a) to both German (1998) and French (2013), so he has a growing number of readers world-wide, some of whom might find their own 'routes' to anthropology and the "Sea of Islands".

Epeli To'imuli Hau'ofa, second of five children, was born in 1939 at Somona in the Louisiades within the Milne Bay Province of what is now Papua New Guinea but then the Territory of Papua where his parents Reverend 'Isikeli (1908–95) and Mele (1909–74) were Wesleyan missionaries. Growing up there and later among the Dobu and Mekeo people, far away from his original 'roots', his thinking about smallness and inter-island connections was conditioned by early experience.

"The sea and the chain of islands along the horizon were ever present", he wrote. "We frequently travelled around these islands on small vessels that were always subjected to the whims of the sea. Whenever at home, we as children spent most of our time in and by the sea" (Hau'ofa 1993b:136–137). The importance of this upbringing in Oceania for his later research (Hau'ofa 1979, 1981) was summarized

by himself in the following way:

> I have worked as a foreign anthropologist, at the postgraduate student level, in Trinidad and Papua New Guinea. In Trinidad, where the local culture is vastly different from anything in Oceania, I was a complete stranger classified as a Chinese Creole by the rural folk, none of whom had ever heard of the South Pacific, let alone Tonga. Among the Mekeo of Papua New Guinea, I felt less of a stranger since I had spent my early childhood in that country and had worked for two years at the University of Papua New Guinea. There was sufficient similarity between Mekeo and other Pacific cultures familiar to me to make me feel at home and to be accepted readily by the people; not as one of them, but as an easily assimilable stranger (Hau'ofa 1982a:216).

Epeli later became a citizen of the Republic of Fiji but was usually regarded as a Tongan because of his family background. He told me that he spoke three Melanesian languages before he learned Tongan. In fact, he did not even know about his 'roots' until he was seven or eight years old (Thomas 2012a:121). Despite that, they may have been more important to his thinking about 'smallness' and the ocean than many have realized. Not only does Tonga have rich maritime traditions, but its people are known for their pride in once having had a "marine empire", remaining an independent kingdom and liking things to be "big".

After studying at universities in Canada and Australia, and in 1966 marrying an Australian woman, Barbara née Brown (1942–2017), he was to become an example of 'the Pan-Pacific Person'. Such a person (1) has lived abroad for long periods, but spent her/his childhood in the islands; (2) is descended from two or more ethnic groups, often brought up by persons of cultures other than those of her/his parents and having blood ties in more than one Pacific country; (3) often has a spouse of different ethnicity; and (4) usually has some years of multi-cultural schooling. Crocombe (2001:62) explains:

> Many people who fit most of the four criteria identify strongly with the wider Pacific and may at times feel better adapted to serve a Pacific regional body than their own country and usually with one ethnic or geographical category within it. They are perhaps the forerunners of people who might become primarily Pacific people and secondarily nationals of a particular country, rather than the reverse.

Epeli made a similar conclusion, although he would have preferred to be called an *Oceanian* because he stressed that Oceania was his home:

> There is an increasing number of people with similar backgrounds to mine. They are working for regional or international organisations, and more importantly they have raised or are raising their families in several of our island countries. To these people, Oceania is home (Hau'ofa 1993b:133).

And that region is huge.It covers more than a third of our planet's surface and is tre-

A view of the "Sea of Islands" from 'Upolu, Sāmoa. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 2000.)

mendously diverse culturally. In Vanuatu alone, 340,000 people speak 138 indigenous languages. As a professor of sociology and founding director (in 1997) of Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific, Epeli became aware of the problematic issues of ethnicity, social class, cultural change, and neo-colonial dependence. To him, the ocean itself was a heritage that all of Oceania's people shared. The sea had been "a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers", he wrote and continued:

> From one island to another they sailed to trade and to marry, thereby expanding social networks for greater flow of wealth. They travelled to visit relatives in a wide variety of natural and cultural surroundings, to quench their thirst for adventure, and even to fight and dominate (Hau'ofa 1993a:8).

In one of his early writings, he stated: "[M]ost educated people in the Pacific, like myself, are trying to redefine their cultural identities, or endeavouring to shed a kind of mentality bred under conditions of colonialism" (Hau'ofa 1975:283). He took a great pride in the maritime history of his ancestors, just as Te Rangi Hiroa, Sir Peter Buck, previously had done in his classic *Vikings of the Sunrise* (Buck 1938), which ends with the words: "We have a glorious heritage, for we come of the blood that conquered the Pacific with stone-age vessels that ever sailed towards the sunrise."

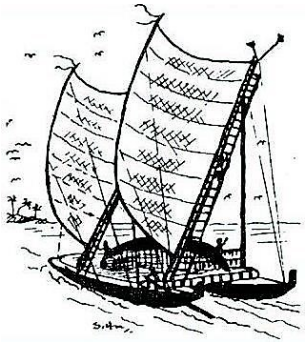
Buck was writing at a time when Melanesians in the light of more or less racist discourses in anthropology were classified as 'Oceanic Negroids' and generally regarded as inferior by Polynesians (Boulay 2000). It was therefore important to him to show that the people on his mother's side, the New Zealand Māori, was 'Europoid' (his father was Irish). He assured his readers that "a tall, athletic people

without woolly hair or a Mongoloid eyefold had the ability and courage to penetrate into the hitherto untraversed seaways of the central and eastern Pacific" (Buck 1938:18). This they did by migrating through Micronesia, so far to the north that they did not mix their blood with that of the Melanesians, he argued.

Like Buck, Epeli had some kind of belittlement in mind when he wrote about Oceania. To Buck, it was important to show that Polynesians were not inferior to Europeans (but superior to Melanesians and Micronesians), and Epeli emphasized that the island world was not small and insignificant. What the two scholars had in common was a goal of encouraging other Polynesians – and in Hau'ofa's case *all* Oceanians – to be proud of their heritage, and others to respect these people. They would have agreed on the fact that the ancient exploration of the Pacific was a remarkable venture. However, whereas Buck, in ethnocentric terms, was eager to point out the differences between the Polynesians and other island peoples, Epeli focused on what they had in common – and most significant of that was, according to him, the ocean.

Like all the other major groups of Melanesians, the Kanaks of New Caledonia are culturally diverse. They speak 28 indigenous languages, and due to the colonial history also (or only) French. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1990.)

Boundaries, Isolation, and Interaction



One reason why it is difficult to generalize about Oceania is that its borders have proven hard to define. When the French explorer Dumont d'Urville in the early 1830s coined the name 'Oceania', it referred to Australia and New Zealand as well as smaller Pacific islands and the islands of Southeast Asia (Clark 2003). To some it strictly stands for the three areas of Pacific islands known as Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, terms that originally referred to racial characteristics and geographical proximity rather than to culture areas (Malm 2013:161). For cultural reasons New Zealand, Hawai'i, Easter Island (Rapa Nui), and West Papua are usually included in Oceania, but for political reasons they may not be. The United Nations and the Oceania National Olympic Committees include Australia, and that changes the picture considerably. Not only is that country larger than all the islands combined, but despite contacts with Indonesian fishermen in northern coastal areas (Macknight 1976) its indigenous people have lived there for tens of thousands of years without those seafaring traditions that are so important to the discourse on the "Sea of Islands". From linguistic and archaeological points of view, island Southeast Asia and parts of its mainland, even Madagascar, could be included in Oceania. This is seldom done, and the reasons have more to do with scholarly traditions than anything else.

If we limit Oceania to Mela-, Micro- and Polynesia, with Indo-Fijians and other "non-Oceanic" ethnic groups to whom the island world is now "home", we still have to consider a factor which is more important than many realize when "Our Sea of Islands" is discussed: the partition into *Near* and *Remote Oceania* (first suggested by Green 1991). 'Near Oceania' is the area closest to the original points of dispersal for the people who settled the Pacific Ocean. It includes New Guinea with the Bismarck Archipelago and islands eastward to the Solomon group. People have lived there much longer than in the rest of Oceania – at least 40,000 years – and speak not only Austronesian languages but also Papuan of several language families. The biodiversity is much higher than in the other region, which is what 'Remote Oceania' refers to. Human settlement there has only taken place within the past 3,500 years, and all indigenous languages are Austronesian.

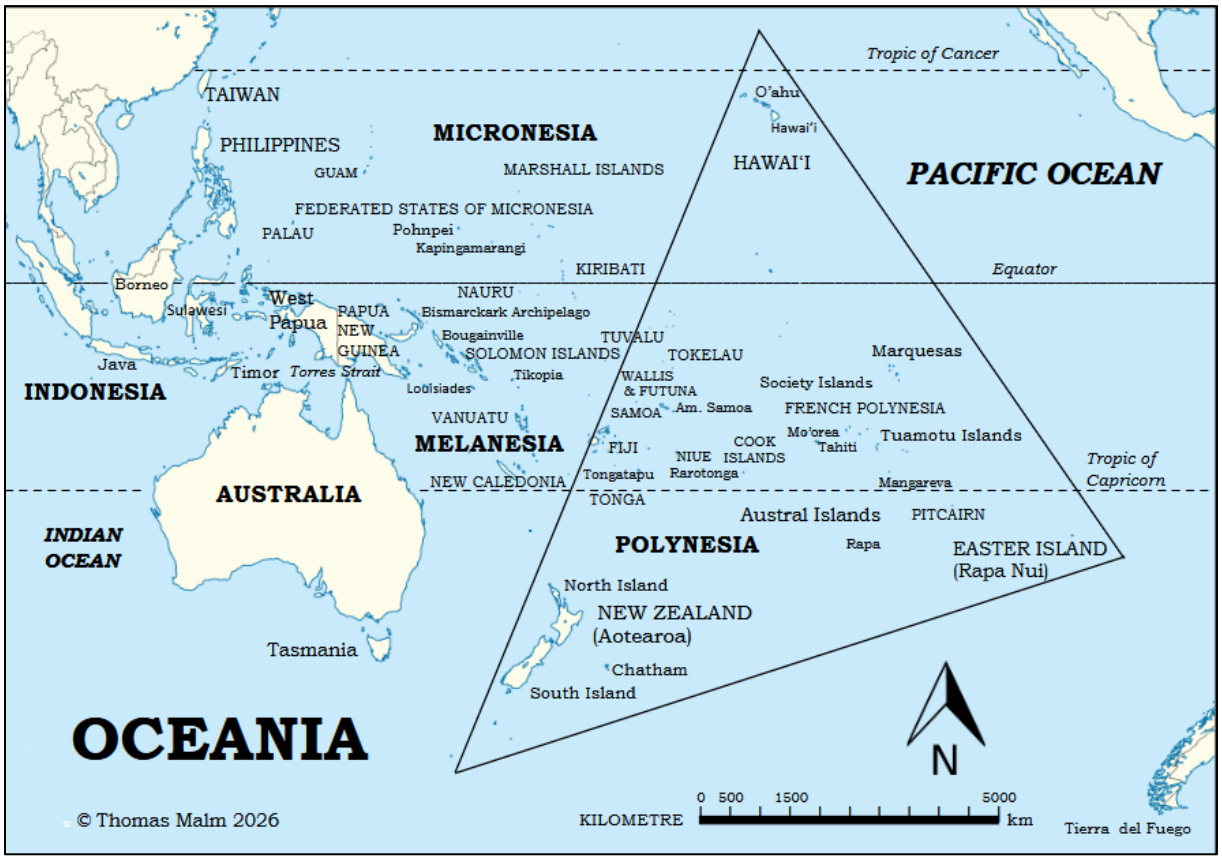
Those insights can be combined with MacArtur's and Wilson's (1967) theory of is-

I once asked Epeli Hau'ofa how he learnt to swim, and he replied: "What do you mean? I just did it!" The boys in this photo can easily go down to a depth of 12 m without any modern equipment in their search for seafood. They represent the diving skills of the Sama or Bajau Laut, a "Sea People" of Mindanao in the Philippines. To them the sea is home just as much as it was for Epeli during his childhood in New Guinea, and their islands ought to be included in Oceania. (Photo: Erik Abrahamsson, 2010.)

land biogeography according to which an ecological island – any kind of habitat that is somehow isolated – is likely to have less species the smaller it is and the further it is located from a source of dispersal. The biggest islands of Oceania (with New Zealand as the major exception) are in the "Near" part. In general, those further away are smaller and geologically younger, and many of them are infertile atolls. In addition, the distance between archipelagos and singular islands increase eastwards, and then there are no possible "stepping stones" for the dispersal of species to or from the Americas. For example, the 15 Cook Islands with only 240 square kilometres of land are spread out over 1.83 *million* square kilometres of sea.

Therefore, settlement in Remote Oceania entailed making necessary modifications of terrestrial environments. Breadfruit, bananas, taro, yam and most of the other food crops were deliberate introductions, and so were pigs, dogs and jungle fowl (Oliver 2002:72–83). The islands, especially in Remote Oceania, became nothing but "transported landscapes" created to sustain human societies (Kirch 1984:135–159). This condition betrays an awareness of problems connected to smallness and limited resources.

The common notion that Oceanians have always had many children is simply wrong, otherwise they would soon have caused tremendous over-population.Measures taken



An example of a "transported landscape": a wetland field of taro in Rarotonga, Cook Islands. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1983.)

to avoid that included celibacy, abortion, infanticide, and withdrawal before ejaculation (Oliver 2002:33). On Tikopia, an island of only 5 square kilometres, there was a concept, *fakatau ki te kai*, 'measured according to the food', which indicates that the people had a fundamental understanding of carrying capacity and sustainability. According to them, the ideal family size would consist of two children – one female and one male – with their parents who must have access to productive orchards, because if the basis was lacking the result would clearly be anti-social (Kirch 1984:118). The usually balanced pattern between people and land did, however, often change after the arrival of Westerners, and so did traditional voyaging:

> Nineteenth century imperialism erected boundaries that led to the contraction of Oceania, transforming a once boundless world into the Pacific island states and territories that we know today. People were confined to their tiny spaces, isolated from each other. No longer could they travel freely to do what they had done for centuries. They were cut off from their relatives abroad, from their far-flung sources of wealth and cultural enrichment. This is the historical basis of the view that our countries are small, poor and isolated (Hau'ofa 1993a:10).

One of the ironies of modern development in Oceania is that although aeroplanes facilitate travelling, walls of bureaucracy isolate some populations from one another. Epeli told me that he found it so sad that Tongans no longer went to Wallis ('Uvea), which used to be a part of the Tongan maritime networks. It is a French territory since 1886 to which a visa (not easily obtainable) is needed for Tongans. On the other hand, French imperialism has also *connected* island peoples who otherwise would probably not have had any contact with one another, as exemplified by the Wallisians,

Futunans, Tahitians, Indonesians, and even West Indians who have come to work in New Caledonia. Something corresponding can be said about U.S.A. and the Micronesians and American Samoans who move to Hawai'i.

In some cases, the connection made via Westerners have resulted in tragedies. Chatham Islands, for instance, are located about 800 kilometres east of New Zealand and were reached by a British ship in 1791. The Moriori people had lived in isolation there for at least 500 years. Measles and influenza that arrived with the Europeans soon decimated the population, and in 1833 some 900 Māori chartered a brig and invaded Chatham, killing or enslaving its people. Only 250 out of circa 2,000 Moriori remained in 1848, and the last full-blooded man died in 1933 (King 1989).

This leads to the question if the island peoples "were confined to their tiny spaces, isolated from each other" *only* because of modern imperialism. As noted by archaeologist Patrick Vinton Kirch (2000:41, emphasis in original), "*both isolation and interaction* are fundamental concepts for the interpretation and understanding of culture change in Oceania". Historian Nicholas Thomas (2012b:23), inspired by Epeli, has argued that "Oceania did not form discrete and isolated populations" and that its art forms "were never products of isolated local aesthetics, but of histories that were entangled in many ways before, during and after the colonial periods". Art also has its 'roots' and 'routes', though, and the distinct carving styles of Hawai'i, Easter Island and the New Zealand Māori were results of traditions that had evolved in isolation from the ancestral communities.

Model of a canoe characteristic of the New Zealand Māori. (Author's collection. Photo: Titilia Raibe Malm.)

Children's yacht race in Muri lagoon, Rarotonga. According to the oral traditions, it was here that the Polynesian seafarers gathered before setting off to faraway New Zealand. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1983.)

'Isolation' is a keyword in the discourse on the "Sea of Islands", so let us here consider the meanings of this concept and turn to natural science for useful perspectives on systems as open, closed or isolated (Smith & Smith 2003:396–398). In an *open* system, such as an ecosystem or an individual organism, there are in- and outputs of matter as well as energy across the system boundary. Inter-island exchange and the acculturation processes following European contact show that island societies are also open systems. In a *closed* system, on the other hand, there occurs in- and outputs of energy, but a material interchange between the system and its environment does essentially not occur. When it is argued that our earth is an island in space, or that Easter Island prior to European contact was like an isolated planet (Bahn & Flenley 1992), it is a system of this kind that is referred to.

Naturally, our earth is not an *entirely isolated* system, because in such a hypothetical system there are no movements at all of matter or energy between the system and its surroundings. Life on earth is dependent on the energy flows to and from its system, and there is also an influx of meteoritic matter – just like driftwood is occasionally cast ashore on Easter Island, for example. An island cannot be isolated in this sense, which means that no island is an "island" (Malm 2007b). In terms of ecological systems theory, Easter Island was a closed rather than an isolated system whose

people were entirely dependent on the resources of their land and marine environment, and without any contact with others. However, seagoing crafts have made isolation in that sense of the term an exception in the case of island societies.

Isolation, or insularity, must be understood as a *relative* concept (Eriksen 1993). Even if no island society was entirely isolated, there were certainly *isolating factors* that could make some societies more isolated than others. The reason why the *Bounty* mutineers chose Pitcairn as a hide-out in 1789 was its remoteness and erroneous location on the sea-chart, and it did remain unvisited for almost 20 years. It is now visited by several yachts and ships every year, and of those who lived permanently on Pitcairn in 1980, more than half had moved or been abroad by the end of the millennium (Källgård 2004:41–42). In that sense, the island is not nearly as isolated as it was two centuries ago, but the situation can be quite different for a resident who is in acute need of advanced surgery only available in New Zealand more than 5,400 kilometres away. Another example is how in January 2022 an erupting sub-marine volcano severed a fibre-optic cable that provided Tonga's internet connection. For 38 days communication with the country was impossible (Schia et al. 2022).

It has also been stated that "Micronesia and Polynesia were among the most disease-

Between 1866 and 1969, some 8,500 people in Hawai'i infected with leprosy were deported to Kalaupapa, a part of Moloka'i island isolated by high cliffs and the sea. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1988.)

Contrary to what many believe, the people of Easter Island (Rapa Nui) had productive gardening at the time of European contact. Their biggest tragedy was not isolation but contact with the modern world system. (Watercolour by Captain Marcus Lowther, 1853. Private collection. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)

free areas of the world because the common infectious diseases could not survive in isolation" (Crocombe 2001:75). The lack of malaria and other pathogenetic micro-organisms and viruses commonly occurring in Near Oceania show us that not only the diversity of macro biota decreases significantly eastwards from the original points of human dispersal (Kirch 2000:56–57). There was a rapid collapse of population levels in many islands of Remote Oceania following European contact and the accidental introduction of transmittable diseases (Oliver 2002:34). From an epidemiological point of view, the island peoples had thus been *more* isolated previously.

It can here be noted that in recent years at least one disease is believed to have been transmitted from Africa to South America via some islands in Oceania. The Zika virus, after having spread from island to island because of people's frequent travelling, reached Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with islanders from French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Cook Islands and Easter Island who were to participate in the Va'a World

Sprint Championship canoe race (Musso 2015).

Another factor not to be overlooked is climate change. The period 1300–1450 was marked by cooling and high tropical cyclone frequencies in the Pacific, possibly resulting in less contact through long distance voyaging (McCall 1993; Nunn 1993: 114, 2003:223–225; cf. Finney 1994). Maybe it was as a result of this that Hawai'i and Easter Island became among the most "isolated" inhabited islands in the whole world, due to navigational knowledge being lost in the mean-time (although it is questionable whether the palm trees once growing on the latter island had timber that was suitable for building voyaging canoes, cf Hunter-Anderson 1998). And, it could be added, they became much *less* isolated following Western exploration, imperialism, and colonialism – not to mention tourism.

Isolation also developed through deliberate social strategies in combination with geographical factors. Near Oceania encompasses a dozen language families and many hundreds of languages that are mutually unintelligible. "Such great linguistic diversity arose primarily through the long time depth of human occupation in Near Oceania, combined with geographic factors favouring isolation", Kirch (2000:87) writes. According to him, there have been two quite different perceptions of the sea-land

*In pre-Christian times, Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau on Hawai'i Island was a place of refuge where those who had broken a sacred law (*kapu*) were inaccessible to human punishment. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 2001.)*

Tanna in Vanuatu is a small island on the map, but these women in the inland village of Yakel had no direct connection to the sea – and most of them had never seen it. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1990.)

relationship in Oceania: one of horticultural people tied to the land, a cultivated territory which was the fundamental basis of social life, and "one of the sea as a highway, with a myriad of routes connecting one's own island to many others". He continues:

> [T]he reticulate grid of complex voyaging networks linking many Pacific islands in late prehistory should not mislead us to conclude that everything was in cultural flux [...]. [I]nter-island connections, although frequently valorized in song and myth, were the purview of a privileged few; most members of Oceanic societies commanded neither the skills nor the physical equipment (voyaging canoes being expensive items of property) to make overseas voyages themselves. Further, would-be voyagers were not always welcomed at their intended destinations (Kirch 2000:304).

Since the first long-distance voyage with the double-hull canoe *Hōkūleʻa* to Tahiti in 1976, dozens of expeditions with vessels built after ancient models have been undertaken and led to a renaissance of the art of navigation in Oceania. Heroes like Kupe, Tangiʻia, and Moʻikeha have re-emerged from history and mythology as inspiration for an Oceanic Viking spirit (to reconnect to Buck's designation). But just as the Scandinavian Vikings were not only peaceful traders who traveled to the Mediterranean or daring seafarers who crossed the Atlantic, but also feared in the British Isles, Oceania had its fair share of canoe-borne plunderers and perpetrators of violence. Epeli grew up in the Massim region of New Guinea, famous for its "Argonauts" who

exchange valuables through the *kula* ring (Malinowski 1922). In other parts of Melanesia, such as the Torres Strait and Solomon Islands, canoe traffic was however associated with quite a different and much less glamorous tradition – headhunting (e.g., see Hviding 1996, Lawrence 1990). And the same Tongans who, through Epeli's writings, appear as magnificent networkers were, in fact, detested for their raids on a series of islands far beyond Tonga: from ʻUvea and Rotuma all the way to Tikopia, Kiribati and Pohnpei (Geraghty 1994, Spennemann 1988:20–21). Over there, the "Tongan maritime empire" (a term which can be debated) is not fondly remembered.

The fact is that the conception of the existence of an Oceania is inevitably a result of the voyages undertaken by Dumont d'Urville and other representatives of Western imperialism. The most famous of them, James Cook, used the learned Tahitian Tupaia to draw a sea chart that is often cited as evidence that the Polynesians possessed extensive knowledge of the Pacific Ocean (e.g., Druett 2010, Eckstein & Schwartz 2019). They did indeed, though by no means of Oceania to the extent that the region would later be given on the world map.

These children in a coastal village on Malekula represent the sea-oriented people of Vanuatu. They paddled this canoe to go to school every day on Vao, a smaller neighbour island, and gave me a lift for a fee. The reason why the colours of the paddle are the same as in the French flag is that between 1906 and 1980 the country (then New Hebrides) was ruled by France and Britain – at the same time! (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1990.)

Copy of Tupaia's map. (British Library, London. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The map shows about 75 of 130 islands Tupaia claimed to know, likely placed in accordance with old route descriptions. Unfortunately, we do not have the complete list. We can assume that those left out were considered by him to be less important for one reason or another. Those on the chart are however primarily located within what would later be called French Polynesia and the Cook Islands, and a few in the western parts of Polynesia. It is tempting to speculate that some of the most difficult-to-interpret names could refer to the outlying areas of Hawai'i and Easter Island. There are also signs that the Tahitians knew New Zealand (Salmond 2019). However, beyond Fiji, Tonga, and Sāmoa, hardly any islands in Melanesia or Micronesia are included. This does not necessarily mean that the Tahitians were completely isolated from the people there or unaware of their existence, but it raises questions about the significance of isolation factors.

One can also question to what extent it is true that a continuum between land and sea is recognized throughout Oceania, as argued by commentators of an earlier draft of this essay (one of them referring to Bonnemaison 1994). Anyone who has seen a sandy beach during high and low tides can understand that there is such a continuum in that zone. However, the sea–land *dichotomy* is of fundamental importance for Oceanic people whether it be how they orient themselves by going "towards the sea" and "towards the inland" (*makai* and *mauka*, to take a well-known example from Hawaiian), how they classify plants and animals (Malm 1999:225–226, 2007c, 2010) or how they characterize inhabitants in different parts of the same island as "land people" or "sea people" (e.g., Sahlins 1962). Epeli mentions that the inhabitants of Tongatapu used to refer to those arriving there as *kakai mei tahi*, "people from the sea", and that this "reveals the under-lying assumption that the sea is home to such people" (Hau'ofa 1993a:8). Maybe it does, but could it not just have been a matter of stating that one could either get to a place by walking or by boat?

Although the Pacific Ocean still is a "Sea of Islands" to many Oceanians (e.g., D'Arcy 2006, Guiot 2013), one thus must be careful when it comes to generalizations about people's relationship to and through the sea before and during the early period of Western impact. Europeans were astonished, in the mid-20th century, to find that at least a million people lived in the highlands of New Guinea (Kirch 2000:70). That might sound like an exception to the rule but was equal to the entire present population of Micronesia and Polynesia (excl. New Zealand and Hawai'i). In the central highland province of Chimbu alone, the fully 458,000 inhabitants are now more than all people (approx. 415,000) who live in Sāmoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and Niue.

Jolly (2001, p. 423) mentions a regional conference in Suva, where "several of the

representatives from Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, and Vanuatu opposed what they saw as an undue emphasis on the ocean and navigation on the part of the Polynesian and Micronesian delegates. The representative from Papua New Guinea pointed out that many Highlanders from the interior of his country had no sense of ancestral connections to the ocean, no knowledge of the sea, and indeed had never seen the sea".

It is true, as Epeli noted, that "along overland trade routes the riches from the ocean penetrated into the hearts of the large islands, and on the largest of them all, into the far reaches of Highlands New Guinea where bailer shells and mother-of-pearl shell discs were the prized possession of warrior leaders" (Hau'ofa 1993b:136). On the other hand, it was probably because the people were *not* directly connected to the sea that they regarded the shells from it as valuable. How many the highland people were

These dancers at a festival in Port Vila represent the enormous cultural diversity of Vanuatu. Photo: Thomas Malm, 1990.

The women of Tonga are usually "at home" in the lagoon and on the reef, where they gather many kinds of seaweed and marine invertebrates. Fishing at the deep sea beyond the reef is however a task for men only. (Photo: Thomas Malm, Tongatapu 1996.)

before the introduction of the sweet potato in the 18th century and the resulting increase in population (Kirch 2000:125–126) can be debated. Nevertheless, for the last couple of centuries, and probably previously as well, the large inland populations of Near Oceania exemplify that the sea was *not* "home" to a majority there, although it certainly was to its coastal communities. On the numerous spread-out islands of Remote Oceania, it would have been the other way around, but (as previously pointed out) we ought to remember that half of their population were *women* who seldom if ever ventured far. As Tongans often say, "men go, women stay".

Either way, no other population in the world of a size comparable to that of Oceania, past or present, can show such a cultural diversity. How to create unity among all its peoples is the big challenge to those who advocate regional co-operation, and Epeli's writings have certainly inspired many to positive thinking. The question that follows is to what extent his vision fits with contemporary realities.

In 1965, Albert Henry (1906–81) became the first premier of the newly self-governing nation of the Cook Islands. As the country was in free association with New Zealand, all its indigenous inhabitants also became citizens there. That same year, 10% of them emigrated there. Although the number of ethnic Cook Islands Māori has grown since then, only 12% of them now live in the Cook Islands. (Photo: Thomas Malm, Rarotonga 1988.)

A Boundless Sea?

Epeli Hauʻofa was an educator within a region fragmented through colonialism and divisions based on more or less stereotypical cultural and racial grounds. The nation where his university was located, Fiji, was the one where Oceanic regionalism had been advocated most eagerly and where the objections had been strongest against a regionalism based on the Melanesia-Micronesia-Polynesia culture area model. The reason for this was its central location in between these areas, and that Fiji had proven itself to have most to profit from co-operation with several organisations that had their headquarters there (Crocombe 2001:12–16).

At the same time, it had big difficulties to establish unity within its own borders, especially due to the tensions between Fijians and Indo-Fijians (citizens with their origins in India) that resulted in nationalist military coups in the 1980s. Ethnical hate crime also occurred at the university. To advocate a world-view with the ocean as a focus for unity was therefore much more than of academic interest to Epeli and his students, particularly since many indigenous peoples – despite the efforts by scholars and politicians to get rid of the partition into Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia – are quite aware of ethnic and cultural differences (Jolly 2001:423, 2007:524).

"Oceania is not small; it is huge and growing bigger every day", he wrote, metaphorically, inspired by a lava flow during a drive on the island of Hawaiʻi which he called his "road to Damascus" (Hauʻofa 1993a:6). Some Hawaiians still say that the goddess Pele causes volcanic eruptions to make the land grow. Come to think of it, the first attempt at unifying, if not Oceania so at least Polynesia, was made by the last reigning king of Hawaiʻi, David Kalakaua, whose principal adviser (an American) encouraged him to send a representative to Sāmoa, in 1885, to seek to establish a confederation of islands with Hawaiʻi as a leading spirit – an endeavour which resulted in little but mutual embarrassment (Meller 1988). Since then, several endeavours at establishing some kind of federation in the Pacific have been made – all from "above", and none carried into effect (Crocombe 2001:596–600).

Some years before writing "Our Sea of Islands", Epeli told another anthropologist (Kolo 1987:25) that "we have been occupied with the varieties of cultures in the South Pacific but we have not recognized the emergence of a single dominant culture

that is shared right through the South Pacific by people like us". This "South Pacific Society", he wrote in a paper, was made up of a privileged class sharing "a single dominant culture with increasingly marginalized local sub-cultures shared by the poorer classes" (Hau'ofa 1987b:1). One might wonder what he meant by "people like us", but it makes me think about how some commentators of "Our Sea of Islands" have argued that ideas of Oceania as one big society mainly express an elite ideology. Here is one example, made by Fijian sociologist Sitiveni Ratuva (1993:96):

> For the Pacific elites (intelligentsia, leaders, bureaucrats, the business community and even chiefs) the world is a big network of interrelationships within which they can identify their interests. For the ordinary workers, underpaid in factories or over-worked in mines and farms, or the poor villagers toiling in the outback, the world is indeed 'small'. The size of the world is determined by the contents of one's pockets and relationship to the power structures. Therefore, redefining the size, as Hau'ofa suggests, is a meaningless exercise to most. It is a redefinition that only has meaning to the internationalist, mobile, educated and financially well off citizens of the Pacific.

After 50 years of development research and administration, Ron Crocombe (2001: 158) came to the same conclusion: regionalism in Oceania is an elite ideology of limited relevance to the majority. As argued by him, it is "the mobile elite who are the main beneficiaries of such identities and use them to draw benefits from the rest of the world". Epeli may not have thought about himself as belonging to an elite, but an academic career invariably entails networking with colleagues, travelling to conferences and joining regional or international organisations.

A political scientist, Douglas Borer (1993:85), has pointed out that Epeli echoed Karl Marx's vision of an international class consciousness by defining Oceania in terms of a mental rather than geophysical space, a Pan-Pacific kind of consciousness, and he stated that efforts at creating mental spaces have repeatedly failed throughout history. "The reality is that Epeli's Oceania is characterised not by a Pan-Pacific unity but by intense national and subnational ethnic divisions", he wrote and concluded: "As a social scientist I see no hope for Epeli's Oceania" (ibid.:86–87).

What we have witnessed during the era of decolonization is not an Oceania where small groups of islands have joined to form larger political entities, but rather a tendency of the reverse. The Ellice and Gilbert Islands had a common colonial history as former British dependencies but became two separate nations – Tuvalu and Kiribati – after gaining independence: one Polynesian, and the other Micronesian. A major reason for this was that the largely Protestant Ellice Islanders feared that they would become a minority ruled by a majority of Catholic Gilbert Islanders (McIntyre 2012). The struggle for independence from Papua New Guinea on the island of Bougainville is another case (Connell, 2020). Another one is French Polynesia, where

Suva, the capital of Fiji, is the political, economic and cultural hub of Oceania. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1984.)

there are movements advocating independence, but not only from France; the idea of becoming ruled from Tahiti is not at all that popular in the Marquesas group (Donaldson 2017).

Now, if the single factor that all people of Oceania have in common is the Pacific ocean, identifying with it would mean being part of something very big. 'Oceania' is, however, as Epeli himself noted, a term used less frequently than one would expect – especially within Oceania itself:

> Hardly any anglophone economist, consultancy expert, government planner or development banker in the region uses the term 'Oceania', perhaps because it sounds grand and somewhat romantic, and may connote something so vast that it would compel them to a drastic review of their perspectives and policies (Hau'ofa 1993a:8).

When he wrote that, 13 years had passed since the South Pacific Forum was founded to enhance the economic and social wellbeing of island people. In 2000, the name of this regional body became Pacific Islands Forum. To understand the perseverance of those who decided to cling to the word 'Pacific' instead of 'Oceania', one must know something about 'The Pacific Way', a concept launched in 1970 by the first prime minister of Fiji in an address to the U.N. General Assembly (Crocombe 1976:1). Thereafter it would be used repeatedly by politicians, development workers,

One of Epeli Hau'ofa's projects at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture was to produce a CD called "Pan-pipes Across the Ocean" (Newsounds Oceania 2002). The pan-pipes were once played from New Guinea to Fiji and Tonga and can still be heard in the village of Yakel on Tanna, Vanuatu, as demonstrated by the musician in this photo. Students from the Solomon Islands brought the instrument back to Fiji where they played it in performances. Little known is that Epeli sang a Tongan song on the CD. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1990.)

analysts, media, and even novelists to summarize alleged common values, practices and sentiments in the culturally, politically and economically fragmented region. In 1996, for instance, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and UNESCO began to distribute a series of monthly programs, "The Pacific Way", to be shown in television throughout the region with the aim to make people realize how much the different nations had in common.

'The Pacific Way', it has been argued, is most of all characterized by (1) an emphasis on distribution and consumption rather than saving and investment, (2) a priority for extensive kinship networks, (3) spending a high proportion of time and resources on

ceremonies associated with initiation, and (4) a lower priority for work time and output than among Europeans and Asians (Crocombe 2001:159).

Politicians who advocated a unity based on such grounds appeared to confirm, involuntarily perhaps, the old prejudice about Pacific islanders as generous and family oriented but lazy and happy-go-lucky, lacking the prerequisites of capable government and economic progress. Before Epeli, the Samoan novelist Albert Wendt (1976) and others had therefore promoted the concept of 'Oceania' as an ethnocultural region, but the terms 'Pacific' or 'South Pacific' remain more frequently used. Especially when the latter term is used, Micronesia, mainly located to the north of the equator, tends to become entirely overlooked (Hanlon 2009).

Not only did tenacious stereotypes and misleading terms linger. Like many other Marxist-oriented analysts of the time, Epeli realized that the goals of decolonization and development towards national independence and self-reliance were hard to fulfil. Instead, formal autonomy had to a considerable degree become synonymous with a *neocolonial dependence* and a mindset nowadays known as *coloniality* (cf. Quijano 2024). "I began noticing the reactions of my students when I described and explained our situation of dependence", he wrote and continued:

The biggest mystery of Micronesia is Nan Madol, a city of stone built on man-made reef islets off the coast of Pohnpei. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 2008.)

> Their faces crumbled visibly, they asked for solutions, I could offer none. I was so bound to the notion of 'smallness' that even if we improved our approaches to production for example, the absolute size of our islands would still impose such severe limitations that we should be defeated in the end. [...] I was actively participating in our own belittlement, in propagating a view of hopelessness. I decided to do something about it [...]. It was a daunting task indeed (Hauʻofa 1993a:4–5).

According to Epeli, "the world of Oceania is neither tiny nor deficient in resources. It was so only as a condition of colonial confinement that lasted less than a hundred out of a history of thousands of years" (ibid.:11). The alternative picture which he had in mind was not that of an extended power for any special country, but rather the opposite: the well-being of ordinary people within and beyond their countries in a boundless sea. "I see the day when all boundaries in our region are done away with in order to allow for an unfettered movement of trade, industries and people", he had written eleven years previously (Hauʻofa 1982b:23).

"The idea of tailoring educational systems away from the present preoccupation with academic and urban orientation arises from the basic misconception of islands being territorially bounded economies and societies", he also argued (Hauʻofa 1987b:5). Put in ecological terms, the emergence of Oceanic diasporas that are globalized as a result of the mobility of island people illustrates that the boundaries of population and habitat do not coincide. This, as Marshall Sahlins (1994) was among the first to note, presents new challenges to anthropological research within the modern world system. "What's at stake", according to Clifford (2001:482), "is the articulation, the cobbling together, of 'big enough' worlds: concrete lives led in specific circuits *between* the global and the local. We cannot lose sight of ordinary people sustaining relational communities and cosmologies: composite 'worlds' that share the planet with others, overlapping and translating".

When Epeli wrote about how island people were able to break out of their confinement, he left the "Sea of Islands" and brought another aspect of Oceanic culture into focus: what economist Geoff Bertram and geographer Ray Watters (1985:511) have called 'transnational corporations of kin'. Those are Epeli's words:

> The resources of Samoans, Cook Islanders, Niueans, Tokelauans, Tuvaluans, I-Kiribatis, Fijians, Indo-Fijians and Tongans, are no longer confined to their national boundaries; they are located wherever these people are living permanently or otherwise. [...] Islanders have broken out of their confinement, are moving around and away from their homelands [...]. They are once again enlarging their world, establishing new resource bases and expanded networks for circulation (Hauʻofa 1993a:11).

The people of Oceania think "big" because of the *sea*, or at least they did so in the past, according to Hauʻofa, but for the situation during the last few decades this may

Only a few generations ago, the Big Nambas of Malekula, Vanuatu, were known as fierce warriors. Graquar, grandson of the legendary chief Viahambat (1928–88), became a student of sociology for Epeli Hau'ofa in Fiji. Here he is showing some of his younger relatives how to use a calculator. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1990.)

be more suggestive than factual. One certainly finds many people in Oceania who are closely associated with the sea and others who are so more indirectly, but there are relatively few signs of it as a central factor for any Pan-Oceanian identity. For instance, referring to an unpublished study made of 976 Tongans and the nature of their conception of their own identity, Helu (1999:78–81) states that they mainly identified with gender, congregation, occupation, family, and other social factors. The results indicate that "[t]he scope of their identities is much more local and national than regional in nature, and there is very limited evidence of an encompassing Pan-Pacific identity" (A. Parr quoted in ibid.:9).

That all *islands* of Oceania share the sea is a geophysical fact. But if there is one sentiment for the environment that is characteristic for the *islanders*, it is the love for the *land*. Geographer Randy Thaman (1993:42) writes that there is a "critical importance of land-based resources to the ordinary people of rural and peri-urban Oceania. It is these resources that 'warm the homes' and produce most of the 'goods which sustain the reciprocity' between islanders in their homelands and their relatives abroad".

King Taufa'āhau Tupou IV of Tonga (1918–2006) was always full of ideas about how to improve the economy of his kingdom, the last of Oceania. Epeli Hau'ofa was his deputy secretary in 1978–81 and was then based in the Palace Office where he served as keeper of records. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1996.)

Access to land is tremendously important all over Oceania, and the lack or loss of land is an ever-recurring theme of tension, whether it be neo-feudal Tonga or colonized Hawai'i. This does by no means contradict the significance of the sea, but love for the land is a perspective which is quite absent from the discourse on the "Sea of Islands". I heard Epeli say at a seminar in Lund (1996) that there was a special strength in being an Oceanian, because no matter where one ended up in the world it was always certain that food and shelter would be available to those who returned to the home island. I remember, also, how he when we met for the last time (in 2002) happily told me that he had bought a farm in Wainadoi on Viti Levu, Fiji. He was indeed, to recapitulate his own words, "a peasant, albeit a highly educated one".

The Contemporary Sea of Islands

In an interview, Epeli Hauʻofa stated:

> We are inextricably part of larger entities: the Pacific region and more importantly, the world economy. The solutions to all the major problems in our islands lie in regional and ultimately in wider international co-operation (even if this means struggle), and not so much in our own small and narrow local efforts (E. Hauʻofa in Subramani 1989:43).

To exemplify this, it could be argued that more than half of all the members of Polynesian societies now live outside the microstates, and for some the proportion is considerably higher. For example, of all Cook Islanders 12% live in the Cooks (Australian Government 2024), and only 5,5% of all Niueans live in Niue (N.S.O. 2023).

Epeli argued that one should "think much less about geographic and cultural divisions, and much more about our region as comprising places where we can feel at home because of our growing networks of human connections" (Hauʻofa 1993b:136). The networks those people have since formed are not limited by the borders of Oceania and the Pacific Rim. I know Fijians who live in Sweden and who are connected not only to relatives in Oceania but also to several that reside – permanently or temporarily – in U.S.A., Dubai, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Cyprus, England, and Germany. They usually contribute to household economies "back home" – even though this can be quite a burden. Some years ago a group of Fijians came over to Norway for what may have been the first funeral of a chiefly Fijian woman on European soil. Another Fijian woman, a student in a master's program at my university, brought me the sad news in 2009 that Epeli had passed away.

While mentioning such examples to other Oceanists, I get reminded of the navigators that Epeli often came back to in his essays. Contemporary migration of Oceanians, it is suggested, is simply a continuity of ancient voyaging. Tahitians sailed with Bougainville and Cook to Europe, Tongans went to Australia already in the early 19th century, others became crewmen on whalers, and when international migration by ship was taken over by aeroplanes these vessels became known as "flying canoes". But millions of people around the world also migrate internationally, most of them without representing any continuity with a maritime past. Are they, as migrants, any

different from those of Oceania? A reference to the sea voyaging traditions is not necessary for understanding contemporary Oceanic migration, and neither does the sea appear to have much to do with it apart from the fact that long distances must be covered either by ship (nowadays seldom) or by aeroplane. People are simply pragmatic: they travel by the means available to them to reach places where they anticipate employment, education, or other benefits.

Moreover, to migrate overseas is not equally easy for all, especially if they are to work without becoming illegal "overstayers". In her balanced critique of Epeli, Jolly (2001:422–423) asks how far his discourse on the "Sea of Islands" actually "is a compelling vision for *all* Islanders and especially for those people of the southwest Pacific who, because of border patrols by nation states, the exclusionary policies of migration, and sheer poverty, are not able, even if they so desired, to move from their newly independent states […]. Although Papua New Guineans, Solomon Islanders, and Ni-Vanuatu migrate much within their nations, only the most highly educated and wealthy travel overseas, and of these only a very few live permanently elsewhere".

The options of migrating are, in fact, quite limited to most Oceanians. Hawaiians primarily move to mainland U.S., American Samoans and Micronesians to Hawai'i or the U.S. mainland, Rapanui to mainland Chile, Wallisians and Futunans to New Caledonia, and Tokelauans, Cook Islanders and Niueans to New Zealand because their islands belong to or are in free association with that nation. Australia and New Zealand have enabled Tongans and other Oceanians to work within agriculture for up to seven months within a 12-month period, but that means temporary work and not a permanent residence permit.

Bertram and Watters (1985) coined the term 'MIRAB', an acronym for migration, remittances, aid, and bureaucracy – factors often seen as determining the development of Oceanic microstates. According to this perspective, these nations are dependent for their welfare on foreign aid and their citizens moving overseas to earn money. The model can be called in question (Clark 2013, Crocombe 2001:396–397, Poirine, 1995). For one thing, it does not fit very well with islands where tourism, cultured pearls or "offshoring services" have become sectors of considerable importance. Marriage, studying, health care or simply experiencing the excitement of city life are very important factors for migration, but working overseas to earn money and help supporting relatives is a significant aspect of the transnational corporations of kin.

Among the strategies exemplifying the latter is for thousands of Fijians to join the British Army or serve as peacekeeping Blue Berets with the United Nations. Still, Fiji

*Shell of a black-lipped pearl oyster (*Pinctada margaritifera*) with a mabe pearl. Pearl farming was in the 1990s seen as a big hope for the future in the Cook Islands, but competition on the world market in combination with parasites, climate change and lack of competence have resulted in a severe decrease of the industry there. (Author's collection. Photo: Christer Lindberg.)*

only comes third – Sāmoa is a close second – when it comes to known remittances per capita in the home country (naturally, many gifts never get accounted for in the statistics). Tonga has for a long time come first. In 2012, for example, relatives living abroad contributed on average US$ 992 per local capita and to around 90% of the household economy, in the case of poorer households some 25% of the income (Fonua 2012).

Reciprocity is often at the basis of what remittances entail. Within the transnationally expanded corporations of kin, this means that a migrant is a potential financial source. One could therefore say that compared to the limited agricultural and fishery products or other commodities, the most important export from Oceania's islands is *people* who have been brought up learning about reciprocity. That these people also contribute as workers, consumers and taxpayers in those countries to which they move is also a fact that should not be overlooked. "Pacific Island peoples and governments should not feel guilty about accepting aid and remittances", economist Bernard Poirine (1998:65) argues, "because, in a way, such external resources

represent revenues from 'invisible exports' to industrialized countries". He continues:

> By exporting labour and "geo-strategic services", small Pacific islands make the best use of the only comparative advantage they may have that allows them to gain from international trade. Donor countries and migrant host countries also gain from this form of international specialization (ibid.:65).

For Epeli, 'small island' was a derogatory term, but in recent years it has become a point of departure for discussions about what island people have in common. The acronym SIDS is now well established with the U.N. for programs concerning the so called 'Small Island Developing States' and a focus on the importance of the smallness, remoteness and limited resources of islands (Stock 2014). It is quite apparent that, although the sea as well as transnational corporations of kin are big, smallness of islands does matter. As Poirine (1998:68) argued, "solidarity links are most developed in the poorest and most isolated communities".

Smallness also increases the cost of government and the need to pay for it, such as exemplified by Niue, a self-governing island with a current population of only 1,600 but 13 village councils plus a national parliament which depends significantly on New Zealand subsidies. Location can also be important in two other ways. In a study on the significance of the distance from an island capital to the nearest one of three major tourist origin markets (Brussels, Washington D.C./Los Angeles CA, or Tokyo), the authors concluded that "over half of island welfare can be explained primarily by geographic proximity to world markets and affiliated political status" (McElroy & Lucas 2014: 363).

A major reason for the interest in the islands by some bigger countries is, on the other hand, not merely remoteness, but rather the *geo-strategic* location in between Asia, Australia and the Americas. Poirine (1995), has pointed out that 'aid' is often just another word for *rent* paid to island governments so that their people will not cause trouble for donor countries wishing to be directly or indirectly represented. The benefits, not only of geo-strategic location but also of environmental load displacement, are a function of perceived remoteness and isolation. The nuclear tests in Micronesia and French Polynesia, or endeavours to dump toxic waste and old car wheels in island territorial waters, express nothing but disrespect for human rights in combination with the notion that the islands as well as their populations are small and located far away from the centres of economic power. Of course, this highlights the belittlement that Epeli deplored, but it is a reality that cannot be neglected by stating that Oceania is an ever expanding "Sea of Islands".

Since smaller islands in general have less people than big ones, they would need less

Lifuka in the Ha'apai group of Tonga, one of many low-lying coral islands threatened by rising sea levels. (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1988.)

money. On the other hand, the more difficulties their governments will most likely have with waste management. Seldom mentioned is that Epeli through his booklet *Our Crowded Islands* (Hau'ofa 1977) became a pioneer in discussing not only over-population but also pollution and environmental degradation in Oceania. At that time, few people realized that there was a connection between another type of environmental impact – greenhouse gas emissions – and smallness of islands. Since the 1980s, it is commonly argued that a continued melting of polar ice due to global warming threatens atolls with small and low land areas becoming submerged and their people environmental refugees (e.g., see Burson 2010).

It might appear as if the governments of Oceania are at the mercy of richer countries and without any say in international affairs, but they have developed some remarkable strategies in dealing with larger metropolitan powers (Baldacchino 2010, Crocombe 2001, Poirine 1995). Legislation and especially independence is in itself an economic asset that can generate a lot of income, such as when Tuvaluans and Tongans together – approximately 110,000 people – have had twice as much of a say as more than one *billion* Chinese and voted for the right of Japan to continue hunting whales, which in its turn made Japan a generous aid provider. Another example of a

truly global kind is how Tonga as an independent nation in 1988 claimed orbital slots in space and leased them to foreign corporations that via satellites could reach two-thirds of the world population.

The most striking aspect of jurisdictions as an economic asset is, however, that many of the microstates are now established as 'offshore finance centres', 'international trust centres' or 'asset protection centres' where one can take advantage of low taxes, discretion or register ships to avoid certain regulations in one's own country. So far, Sāmoa, Marshall Islands, Cook Islands and Vanuatu are those that have been most successful. When I worked in the Cook Islands in 1983-84, there were rumours that this nation was to become an tax haven. Twenty years later, the number of foreign based banks, insurance companies, shipping companies and other enterprises registered there equalled one per every sixth inhabitant! As for the Marshall Islands, they have one of the biggest flotillas in the world, with more than 3,000 ships registered there (Rutkowski 2020). Tax evaders, crime syndicates, drug and arm dea-

A flower parade in Avarua, capital of the Cook Islands, before the nation began to offer the rest of the world "offshore finance services". (Photo: Thomas Malm, 1983.)

Katarina Leilani Malm, representing a new generation to whom the sea is not only "home" but also lots of fun. (Photo: Titilia Raibe Malm, Waikiki, Hawai'i 2024.)

lers, and totalitarian regimes increasingly use offshore finance services. Already 15 years ago, it was estimated that a third of the world's capital was deposited in tax havens (Ryle 2011).

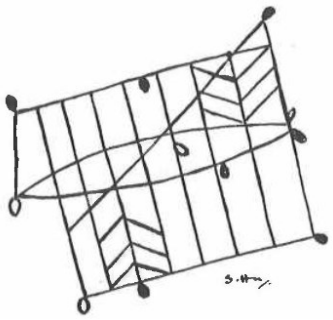
Whether such endeavours are good or bad, and to whom, is a question that is best left behind here. Let us instead return to the question of size and location and ask ourselves if there is necessarily something bad about being small. Can there not also be problems about being a *big* nation, such as balancing a huge budget, keeping regions together, avoiding ethnic conflicts, etc.? For the Oceanian context, Thaman (1993:41) writes:

> The very fact that many communities are small, isolated and have few resources normally regarded as economically exploitable by industrialised countries, has in fact forced societies such as Kiribati to be extremely self-reliant and dedicated to sustainable and modest systems for development.

Despite problems connected to smallness and a location remote from the centres of power, smallness within bigness *can* thus be "beautiful". That is Oceania in my mind.

*Epeli Hau'ofa was both amused and surprised to see my collection of shells from Tonga and other parts of Oceania. This is a Triton's trumpet (*Charonia tritonis*) in a photo from a book inspired by his essay "Our Sea of islands": Christer Lindberg's and mine* Sea of Shells *(2015). This kind of shell has been used on many islands as a signalling devise, including arrival and departure of voyaging canoes. (Author's collection. Photo: Christer Lindberg.)*

Conclusion



More than three decades after Epeli Hau'ofa's essay "Our Sea of Islands" was first published, it remains a beautiful rhetorical device. As he himself wrote, it was not intended as an end, but as a beginning of an important discussion: "For we have just gathered around the kava bowl, and our assembly has been guided by the spirit of its ancient protocol" (Hau'ofa 1993b:139). With that in mind I wrote this paper, although it turned out to be deconstructive in its character.

In examining some of his thoughts on Oceania and discussing 'isolation' as an absolute vs. relative concept, I pointed out that there were isolating factors there long before Western impact and that several islands became *less* isolated thereafter. I also argued that in total numbers, the sea was not "home" to a vast majority of the people, especially in Near Oceania.

Solidarity links have expanded the world of the Oceanians and are more important for identity than the connecting sea. Many islands may be small, but island communities are primarily confined by social structure and only secondarily by space encompassing land and ocean. Societies of Oceania are increasingly global in nature, although the options to migrate internationally are often restricted. Whereas the geophysical entity that we call Oceania is not growing, and to a hitherto unknown extent even risks shrinking in consequence of global warming and rising sea levels, its people have managed to maintain 'transnational corporations of kin' despite vast distances.

I conclude that in Oceania the shadows of colonialism and problems connected to neo-colonialism prevail. It is also clear that smallness does matter for income as well as for the malign effects of globalization. Emigration, limited resources for export, coloniality, problems with waste, efforts at creating offshore finance centres, etc. are all connected in one way or another to smallness and remote locations. Thus, "smallness" and location "in a far sea" are inescapable factors for understanding contemporary Oceania as the "Sea of Islands" that Hau'ofa had in mind. But beyond that, there is also another implication: The importance of the ocean, both as a metaphor and as a geophysical fact, cannot be overstated.

In an increasingly global era, it is time to think of
our Earth as an "Island of Seas" and *humanity* as a "Sea of Islands".

S. HOLEWZ

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